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R&D from lab to business

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Preview:

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They also have to rely on outsiders to help do research and development. But how can they do so when it's hard just keeping track of what all the researchers at in-house?

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Article:

Even the biggest companies these days realize they can't develop all the technology they need by themselves.

They also have to rely on outsiders to help do research and development. But how can they do so when it's hard just keeping track of what all the researchers at a single big company are doing in-house?

Mehran Mehregany would like to think he has an answer.

The Case Western Reserve University engineering professor is leading an ambitious venture to give companies and other big R&D users new access to research and the chance to manage it better.

If it lives up to its billing, NineSigma Inc. will keep up with what's going on in each user's field with constantly updated Internet postings. It will help companies find the best people to hire for a research job or to employ full time. It will bring experts together to offer guidance on technologies and will sell software to connect the many researchers at big institutions so they can better coordinate their work.

NineSigma's strategy might seem impudent were it not for the support the start-up is getting. It has put together a star-studded lineup of strategic advisers, is raising millions of dollars and has attracted interest from some big potential customers.

Huntington F. Willard, president and director of the Research Institute of University

Hospitals of Cleveland, is impressed with the Internet site's delivering tailored information to researchers.

Willard would like to use NineSigma software to link the researchers scattered in 20 departments at the institute so they are informed about what each other is doing and can more easily trade information. "This would develop a sense of community," Willard said.

NineSigma is talking with or testing its services with companies including TRW Inc., Brush Wellman Inc. and Avery Dennison Corp.

Mel Freedman, Avery's vice president of advanced concepts and products, is interested in several of NineSigma's services, ranging from finding out about available government grants to gaining more efficient access to experts.

Among the members of its blue-chip Strategic Advisory Board, NineSigma counts two former undersecretaries of defense in charge of research and engineering and Mary L. Good, former undersecretary of technology for the U.S. Department of Commerce and president-elect of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

NineSigma's business headquarters will be in Cleveland while operations are based in Pittsburgh, where it can tap into the software expertise that Carnegie Mellon University generates. The company's co-founder and chief technology officer is Kaigham J. Gabriel, a professor of electrical and computer engineering there.

Come Oct. 1, when its Web site goes live, each person who registers will be able to get a customized list of patents issued, research contracts they can bid for and articles from professional journals. The site is

<http://www.ninesigma.com>

NineSigma also is compiling a list of researchers around the world and what they're working on - a kind of White and Yellow Pages of the global R&D community, as Mehregany puts it. As of June 30, it had nearly 1.3 million e-mail addresses.

The company wants to serve as an R&D headhunter, matching companies' needs with researchers who can meet them.

For instance, Cleveland-based Brush Wellman, the beryllium operation of Brush Engineered Materials Inc., is trying out NineSigma to find experts to solve a couple of technical issues.

Brush Wellman President William R. Seelbach said NineSigma had searched its database and produced four or five interesting leads on researchers who may have the expertise Brush Wellman needs in nondestructive testing. He said it was too early to say yet if the searches had been successful.

Mehregany promises that NineSigma will be able to keep such searches confidential, an important issue for both companies and researchers. "We want to be the trusted intermediary," he said.

At the same time, program managers at the company will take more substantial research topics and, for a fee, put together four or five top researchers to examine, say, the technical challenges and opportunities of using mouse models for genetics research.

A key to the company's effort is its software. Mehregany claims that it produces results 30 times as relevant as well-known Internet search engines, which often generate large numbers of "hits" that have nothing to do with the user's interests.

Could the company be biting off more than it can chew? "It sort of seems like it's a very broad product right now that may need to be refined," said Steven J. Kafka, a senior analyst in e-business trade at Forrester Research Inc. in Cambridge, Mass.

NineSigma also has some competitors.

For instance, Community of Science Inc., a Baltimore company that grew out of Johns Hopkins University's attempts to keep track of researchers sequencing DNA for the Human Genome Project, already tips researchers about possible government contracts. It has a database of 420,000 researchers and what spokeswoman Susan Fallon calls "an aggressive growth plan."

Various Internet brokers barter and sell patents and other intellectual property.

Mehregany argues that such companies don't do what NineSigma will and that it has a novel technology for matching the best people with the needs of private industry. He raised \$600,000 last March for the venture and is expecting to complete \$3 million in private financing by the end of September.

Among the investors is retired Steris Corp. Chief Executive Bill R. Sanford.

Sanford said Mehregany has shown he can commercialize a business. "In the venture business, one bets on the players, and he is certainly an A player and has an A idea as well," Sanford said.

Mehregany, 38, left Iran for the United States at age 17 because he was a member of the Bahai, a religious minority that was persecuted after the revolution there.

Educated at the University of Missouri and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he became an authority on microelectromechanical systems, or MEMS. These combine tiny sensors and actuators on computer chips for a growing array of products.

He sold a MEMS business he started, Advanced MicroMachines Inc., to B.F. Goodrich Co. He is taking a year off from Case to work on NineSigma full-time.